Mexican Folk Functional Graphics

by Isaac Kerlow

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Sensacional de Diseño Mexicano gathers a broad sampling of folk graphics created for functional purposes that, as is true of much arts and crafts production, surpasses the objective that originated it. The signs, posters, murals and labels comprising it do not only point out, identify and indicate but also evoke visions, unveil illusions, confess secrets and, sometimes, establish a dialogue with the spectator by inciting him or involving him in a play on words.

The aim of graphic expressions of the urban environment is to advertise the products and services offered by establishments. Thus, their initial purpose is to induce clientele to come in, by showing their best face possible: taco places (or *taquerias*), small eating establishments and restaurants where one can eat like a king; cantinas and bars selling *pulque* (an alcoholic drink made from fermented cactus juice), overflowing with camaraderie; stores that make everyday life easier; workshops, spare parts stores, barber shops, locksmiths or shoe stores, where things are fixed, improved, restored to health and made beautiful. But these graphics also advertise dances and concerts, wrestling matches or bullfights.

Four well-defined categories dominate this potpourri of functional graphics: signs, posters, murals and labels; and each one of them has a certain parallelism with other categories of contemporary graphic design including signage, packaging and corporate identity. Signs are fundamentally typographic compositions that are at times accompanied by vignettes. Murals are large scale illustrations for the public to see, illustrating events or decorating establishments, which are in their own related to the works of the Mexican muralist school. Labels and packaging continue a long tradition that dates a few centuries back, to the origins of commercial and advertising art.

Without a doubt a majority of these works have a great similarity with the graphic expressions produced in tens of cities and towns on the five continents. This similarity becomes even more obvious when graphic and hand-lettering techniques are insufficient to achieve the desired effect. In any event, what gives them their eminently Mexican identity is their visual humor, double entendre, play on words and uninhibited creativity.

Some outstanding examples of these plays on words and visual games include, for example, the way roles are exchanged between the pig and the butcher in a mural, or a decoration on the door of a truck where the image of a loincloth of a Tontonaco indigenous male is placed exactly over the lock on the door, simulating a chastity belt for the smiling figurine, who is amused at the wild idea. This visual humor, just like pantomime, is clearly understood with no need for a verbal explanation, in the classic sense of the joke that needs no words in almanacs and comic strips. Another classic format for these mural cartoons or caricatures is the before-and-after scenes which, through this effective visual communication technique, try to persuade the viewer with examples of amusing comparisons between what was broken and then fixed.

The many-sided nature of these works ranges from the elegance of simplicity to the poor taste of excess. Nonetheless, despite their technical ingenuity and continuous use of clichés and commonplace settings, most of these images stand out for their imagination, spontaneity and audacity. The results of this lack of creative restraint are unexpected and surprising: sometimes they hit the mark with devastating precision and at others they deviate from the train of thought and reach the extreme of creating contradictory meanings, due to lack of a technical command and creative tools. But even when this happens, many of these works show an admirable visual logic that would be the envy of some contemporary artists in vogue.

In certain cases, the final results can be compared to the most sublime moments of the "Absurd" theater approach. Is there anything more absurd than a Roman Caesar eating Mexican *tortas,* a kind of sandwich? Perhaps only paramedics carrying an enormous sick shoe on a stretcher. Contradictions and non-sensical juxtapositions such as these result in a harmonious cacophony that give Mexican functional graphics its own distinctive identity and dynamics.

Functional graphics needs no explanation to be enjoyed; its ingenuity and lack of inhibition speak for themselves. Nonetheless, these works can be subjected to an in-depth analysis by taking into consideration some aspects of their historical, geographical and cultural context. They are part of Mexican folk tradition, they are indivisible from technological wanting and go hand in hand with the instruments inherent to our folk culture: improvisation and ingenuity. These works originate in different cities and towns of Mexico and may be compared to similar creations in the fields of graphic design, traditional arts and crafts and contemporary visual art.

Designing Whatever Comes Out First

One of our first impressions when looking at the works documented in *Sensacional de Diseño Mexicano* is the technical casualness over the way in which they have been carried out. This is in part due to the fact that an overwhelming majority of our folk functional graphics is created, as we say in Mexico, "whatever comes out first." In other words, work is created in a swoop, without preliminary sketches or much planning. This technical and creative lightheartedness can be interpreted, either as an imagination that lets the mind go free or as anarchical imperfection, depending on how you look at it. If we stop and think about the graphic standardization that surrounds our daily lives, this lighthearted attitude assumes a poetic nature. But it also has another dimension when viewed through the prism of contemporary graphic design, the professional practice of which is based on applying visual communication principles that have been developed and fine-tuned over centuries.

The purpose of these principles has been to provide a rational system that contributes to the legibility of the printed word and facilitates mass production of visual communication. Design academies and professional associations have taken charge of fine-tuning and disseminating these principles of composition, typography and illustration, and adapting them to the new media, from printing with moveable type during the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, to commercial lithography in the eighteenth century, rotogravure in the nineteenth century, photocomposition in the mid-twentieth century, to today's digital and interactive publishing. One of the challenges facing the contemporary graphic designer lies precisely in developing new interpretations of these visual communication principles and providing them with a unique flavor, one which expresses both the individual creative personality and the local cultural environment.

Folk functional graphics express the individuality of the creator and the cultural environment, but unlike professional design, it does so by ignoring the design principles. A study of the different documents reproduced here will reveal how many of them completely scorn the principles of visual communication or use them only to a certain extent, copying them mechanically and imperfectly, although with a certain degree of originality and surprise.

The practice of hand-lettering dates back many centuries, when the secrets of the technique were taught only to members of the guild. It is important to consider this because many of the specialized fields of contemporary graphic design (including typographic illustration, architectural signage and billboard advertising graphics) have evolved from this trade. In Mexican folk functional graphics, hand-lettering is a practice in which not only artisans specializing in the trade are en-

gaged, but also untrained individuals who engage in the practice out of dire necessity and lack of funds. Improvisation is even greater due to the limited specialized labor and limited budgets.

Hand-lettered signs include the refined decorative variations that sometimes adorn public transportation vehicles, the cartoons that enrich the signs and facades of business establishments, as well as the design of the typefaces themselves. It is perhaps in the area of typography where there is the greatest unawareness, almost absolute disregard for graphic design principles. It would seem as if the foremost creative criterion with regard to drawing letters is to go against the rules. Some examples of this situation include the unexpected ligatures between characters, the inconsistency between the visual weight of strokes, a lack of stylistic continuity, the multiple versions of the same character, and the failure to use a baseline to establish and preserve a formal rhythm.

The posters advertising a wrestling match, a dance or concert are often times the most professional examples of folk functional graphics, since most of them were designed and printed under the supervision of a specialized typographer. Their technique is backed by basic rules of graphic design and, although they are still shrill and preposterous, they do serve as effective communication tools. As a general rule, the hierarchy of visual information in these posters is defined by letters with different styles and sizes; illustrations and cartoons play a well-defined role in visual reinforcement of the concepts in question, and colors are selected according to budgetary considerations and the desired effect.

The murals of Mexican folk functional graphics are hand-painted on walls in urban areas or along highways. Interestingly enough, the combination of rough surfaces, limited hues and simple brushes lead to finishings that are reminiscent of expressionism or primitive art forms. But, regardless of the materials used, there is almost always a certain range of technical expertise in the areas of drawing, painting and hand-lettering. Several of these wall paintings are outstanding examples of one of the classic design parameters: harmony between form and function. Not only can people enjoy them from the strictly visual standpoint of color, surface and drawing quality, but many offer viewpoints that are rarely found in billboards created with photographic and digital techniques. These surprising viewpoints emerge in the form of unintended jokes, particularly by evoking feminine beauty and the power of technology, in which the technical limitations of classic drawing create faces and bodies that attempt to represent the stereotype of beauty promoted by the mass communication media, but end up as caricatures. Likewise, machinery and technology, particularly on the walls of repair shops, end up being caricatures of precision, mechanical perfection and digital efficiency.

Unintended Art: Popular Crafts and Avant-Garde Visual Arts

Over the past few decades, art critics have focused on the relationship between the so-called "high" or elite culture and the "low" or popular culture. The latter, in its broadest sense, refers to the lopsided collection of folk art, commercial art, underground art, and crafts. The former, on the other hand, generally refers to the fine arts, which have traditionally been displayed in salons and directed at more specialized circles. The work shown in *Sensacional de Diseño Mexicano* belongs to the sphere of folk and popular culture, but also interacts in both directions with the visual arts.

During the sixties, particularly through Pop Art, we witnessed a mass, mutual influence between these two cultural spheres. Within the Mexican perspective, there are numerous examples of folk graphics and art that have inspired the great masters of the visual arts and music, such as Diego Rivera and Rufino Tamayo, or Pablo Moncayo and Blas Galindo, who included native indigenous ele-

ments in their creations.

But in addition to inspiring and influencing high art, folk functional graphics has appropriated the symbols and techniques originated in elite culture. This appropriation, practiced for years by folk art creators, has become much more common in recent decades in the sphere of the post-modern artistic movement of the late twentieth century. The interpretations and adaptations of elite culture in folk culture are reminiscent of the originals but they are not duplicates, perhaps due to the shortage of tools and skilled labor.

Adaptations of world-renowned icons are one way of appropriating symbols and including them in the local cultural arsenal. In this monograph, we are able to see examples of appropriations of company logotypes that were developed under million-dollars design programs in order to maintain a coherent corporate image. We also find appropriations of pop culture icons such as the R2D2 robot in the Star Wars series, Warner Brothers cartoon legend Porky Pig, singer Michael Jackson with his flashy sequin suits, and the Gremlins in the movie of the same name. The use of these icons in new contexts affords them unanticipated dimensions reminiscent of the typical surrealist exercise of the 1930s: placing an object or everyday image in an unexpected environment to create "a new reality."

Visual parallelisms between folk functional graphics and contemporary visual arts constitute another aspect of the interaction between these two environments. The lack of drawing and shading technique produces a large amount of attempted figurative images that become abstractions which, out of context, display unique originality and beauty. The textures of the surfaces on which many of these images are painted broaden their aesthetic dimension. The stroke quality and gesture in some drawings are reminiscent of the work of Willem de Kooning or the scribblings of Pierre Alechinsky; also, the accidents of spilled paints and layers of worn or cracked paint remind us of the Action Painting in vogue in New York during the 1950s or in the finishings of Antoni Tàpies.

The aesthetic intent of these masters was unquestionably different from that used by folk artists in their work, but the similarity in results is nothing short of amazing. Some of the poorly executed folk drawings or paintings are similar in style to the work of Jean Dubuffet and other followers of the "Art Brut" movement. Many poorly-done drawings transcend the limits of ugliness and allow us to see their coarse lines from an aesthetic viewpoint. In some cases, their charm lies in an unexpected delicateness; in others, a brutal lack of proportion.

Folk functional graphics is anonymous. Although some creators are professional sign painters, an overwhelming majority are amateurs. Even when the graphic work is signed, its creators remain unknown in the professional circuits of graphic design and visual arts. But anonymity does not limit the power and individual stamp of the creators of folk graphics. One need only recall Jose Guadalupe Posada, one of the few creators of folk graphics who received full recognition. In this respect, folk functional graphics is closer to the visual arts than graphic design, since its lack of concern over technical and creative aspects emphasizes the individuality of its creator.

P.S.

A quick look at the international graphic design contests and professional directories over the past decade clearly reveals that the dominating standards have evolved from an orderly, impersonal and even cold style to a more playful, personal and even chaotic solutions; especially in the areas of typography and commercial illustration. There is no question that folk graphics have played a predominant role in this evolution of style. Hundreds of the illustrators who have received international awards have developed their own personal style based on the original, hand-made tones of func-

tional folk graphics. Hundreds of new typefaces have been created by scores of type foundries, retrieving the levity and charm of the letters drawn by hand-lettering amateurs all over the world. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of alternative digital font designers, such as Émigré, FontShop, T-26 and House Industries, among others, have enriched their catalogs with new typefaces, based on folk graphics, graffiti, video games and hip-hop.

If we view folk functional graphics from the perspective of the Internet, we can observe the subtle, though significant, influence of this medium on contemporary digital graphic communication. Just as amateur sign painters have stamped their personality and opinions on walls in public streets during the twentieth century, many individuals follow, through the Internet, the tradition of self-publishing and spontaneous freedom of expression. In both media, we witness two versions of the same dynamic: the personal statement, with no restrictions on style, and the eclectic discourse that answers only to its own internal logic.

Isaac Kerlow

An artist and designer, Isaac Kerlow has promoted the use of digital technology in art. In 1986 he became the first digital artist to have an individual exhibit at Mexico City's Modern Art Museum. In the mid-1980's Kerlow began to design the "Maya Series," typographical collections based on Mexican folk functional graphics and pre-Columbian architectural forms. He has also written several books, including the second edition of *The Art of 3D Computer Animation and Imaging*, published by John Wiley and Sons.

Kerlow developed his career as an independent artist in Mexico, Barcelona and New York, where he founded and for a decade was the chairperson of the Computer Animation and Interactive Media Department of Pratt Institute in New York. He has been a guest artist in several European and Asian institutions and has participated as a panel member or official in international festivals and organizations, including the New York Art Director's Cub, the American Institute of Graphic Arts, the Webby Awards, the Hollywood Digital Film Festival, The International Electronic Cinema Festival, Res Fest, and ACM/SIGGRAPH. Since 1995 he has been director of digital production at The Walt Disney Company in Los Angeles, where he was also at one time in charge of the group of artists and animators at Disney Interactive.